

Recently, I had the opportunity to represent our country in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The importance of this region cannot be underestimated. The history of the area, the war on terrorism and the possibility of peace in the Middle East, combine to make this region critical to the United States' goals of spreading democracy and achieving stability in the 21st Century.

In Kyrgyzstan, I saw an opportunity to create a real democracy in the middle of Central Asia. While visiting the American University in Kyrgyzstan and the Ganci airbase, a US facility in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, I witnessed America doing what it does best. Whether it was students sharing their ideas of democracy or service members protecting our interests, America's presence is having a positive impact.

Next, I visited Uzbekistan where I observed a number of challenges. The reminders of the old Soviet Regime are pervasive throughout the country. Unfortunately, repression continues and we must wonder where the country is headed. Our immediate decision in light of recent events, is whether we work with the current government and press for change or move out. However, through it all there is also a sense of hope. In my discussion with Tursunov Hikmetulla, Uzbekistan's Defense Minister, he stated, "Democracy is a powerful thing; how you get there is another thing." The road to democracy is long and never easy.

While traveling in a C-130 Hercules cargo plane over the Hindu Kush mountains, I was overwhelmed by a sense of hope and reminded of the Ghost Wars of the 1980s and 1990s when we secretly aided the Afghans in ousting the old Soviet regime and then we left. Next, the Taliban took over the country, Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda moved in and then September 11th occurred. Our stop in Afghanistan was filled with questions regarding the country's future and a feeling that we must not repeat history by leaving Afghanistan. In Kabul, we have made major accomplishments, however the work is far from finished. Of course, there will be many challenges ahead as the country works towards democracy, but the US must remain committed to ensure that history is not repeated.

In 57 years of independence, Pakistan has had its ups and downs, however I believe the country is currently making positive progress. The importance of this country to the stability of the Middle East cannot be underestimated. During a meeting with President Musharraf, he told me that he is working on bringing a program he calls "Enlightened Moderation" to his country. However, the country's past will strongly affect its future. This was evident when we had dinner with tribal leaders in Peshawar, stopped in the Khyber Pass near Tora Bora and toured the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Through visiting Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, I witnessed the results of American foreign policy decisions first-hand. Some conclusions I came to are that the Administration needs to be honest with the American people, we cannot fight the war on terrorism in this region on the cheap and we must commit for the long haul. To ensure success, we need the same time and commitment that we put in South Korea and Taiwan during the 1950s through 1970s. Realistically, we are not to the point where we should be reducing the

number of troops.

To successfully make democracy work in this region we must understand the causes of terrorism and the dynamics and history of the region. The Islamic World is a combination of countries with a history of conflict, such as Pakistan and India at the Kashmir border, the Iraq and Iran border and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We must work with all of our allies in leading the way to ensure the region meets the goals of social and economic stability.

In addition, we must remember that the war on terrorism cannot be won without focusing on the underlying causes of terrorism. To be clear, the causes in Afghanistan include extreme poverty and illiteracy. The annual GDP of Afghanistan is a little over \$5 billion a year and half of this comes from drugs. To put this in perspective, Fresno County agriculture production for 2003 was a little over \$4.1 billion, Kings County over \$1.1 billion and Kern County over \$2.5 billion. Another cause is extreme illiteracy. It is a problem when only 6-7% of the country's 25 million people are literate. In addition, extreme Islamic Fundamentalism is pervasive throughout society. Lastly, tribal feudalism is another factor that divides the country.

Numerous examples from history prove that we need to continue investing time and resources in the region now, so that we are not dealing with a far worse situation. Most importantly, we need to be successful in this region because we all know it is better to fight terrorism abroad than at home.